

servant of the Lord to which his whole life had been directed, then he could not escape his past. As he sent his gifts on ahead and spent the night by himself, he knew the gravity of the situation. He was by himself because everything was in God's hands, and he was as empty handed before God as the day that he walked out of the Promised Land to head for Mesopotamia (28:18f.).

### Application

Today, I have made a fair amount of theological comment in describing the text, in order to explain what was going on. The most significant message from this passage does indeed concern the importance of facing the past. On the Cross, Jesus Christ took away the powers of evil, and this means that we can now face anything knowing that our Lord does not condemn us for our sin if we have faith in Him. The sins of our past are swept clean not by some spiritual magic, as if to disappear with some sleight of God's hand. Each of us comes to Christ with problems in our past and problems which we have to deal with now. Yet because Christ has died for us, we can be set free precisely because we can face our sins and our past knowing that we have an answer, and knowing that Satan has no more power to harm us through them; if we submit to His authority. Too many good Christian people today harbour difficult things inside them from the past which they say they have 'dealt with', but their lifestyle demonstrates to others all around that they have not; and people are often too polite to say so. Then, in a place of Christian counsel, they become deeply distressed at even the thought of discussing or raising issues of difficulty or hurt from the past. Here is the problem; the sins have not been 'faced' or submitted to God's authority. If they had, they would have no more power over the emotions. You cannot say that Christ has dealt with all your sins in the past unless their power has been removed, and the evidence of this is that they no longer affect you, your behaviour or your friends and relationships.

Jacob was led by God to 'face' his past. He did not have the benefit of a Saviour within his earthly lifetime, though the New Testament speaks of his hearing the Gospel from our Lord at the Resurrection (Matt 27:52)! His experience remains a lesson to us about how to pursue our call in a godly way, and there are few of us today who should not consider very carefully whether we need to 'face' issues from the past from a position of faith and trust in our God who is our Saviour, so that we can move into our 'Promised Land'.

### Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. If the Lord told you to give away most of your own wealth, could you do so? Would you be willing to place everything 'on the line' for God? We know what the answer should be, but please discuss whether the Lord asks this of some people, and why.
2. Is it always important to resolve issues 'face to face'? discuss this and identify when it may be unwise for this to be the case.
3. Some people reject the idea of going back over the past. Is this wise? If so, how do you interpret this story, and what does it say to us?

### Discipleship

Our lives are very complex. You may well have the experience of thinking that you have honestly 'dealt' with every problem from the past, and then some memory comes up which hurts, and you realise that there are issues which need your attention. Sometimes we have the help of a loved one, a counsellor or friend, but there is no reason why we cannot bring an issue from the past to the Lord in prayer and hand it over to Him. If we do this honestly, then He will tell us if we need to do more. Sometimes, simply doing this is enough for us to have victory over the enemy in some important matter; and consequently, we are 'set free'!

### Final Prayer

Great Lord and Master. We are amazed at the complexity of the lives You have given us to lead. Sometimes we cannot even remember properly what has happened from day to day! Help us, we pray, to remember that which is spiritually important and leave what is best forgotten, and give us the grace to know the difference! AMEN

### Prayer

Let us rejoice in You, our Lord and Saviour. You are both the Temple and the Priest; You are the King upon the throne, and the Servant in the courtyard; You are our Guide along life's pathway, and the Healer of our wounded souls. You are more to us than those who trust in mere humanity can ever understand, for You are the only God, and our Lord of All. AMEN

### Other Prayer Suggestions

#### Weekly Theme: Young families and the Church

Pray today for families where there are tensions and distress because of trouble between parents. Some young parents find it too hard to learn the lessons of living together and struggle to protect their children from their own insecurities and distress. This can create lasting trouble, break-up and even damage to children. Pray fervently for them with love.

### Meditation

Jesus, be merciful, Lord Jesus, hear the cries  
Of those whose lives are blighted or controlled  
By all the fearsome power of broken hearts;  
Promises lost; emotions torn apart by strife.

Too many harbour brokenness or wounded souls;  
They carry on, but life's loves are irretrievably lost,  
And counselling confirms the awful, anguished truth  
That human help demands they face the 'pain too painful',  
When needing just a hand to hold and say that they are loved.

Jesus, be merciful, Lord Jesus, hear these cries;  
Come break the torrid grip of Satan's evil lies  
Which turn our living into earthly hell,  
And by Your Cross and endless love,  
Bind up the hopeless human heart,  
And lead it on.

### Bible Study - Genesis 32:13-21

<sup>13</sup> Jacob spent the night there, and then he made a gift for his brother Esau from what he had with him; <sup>14</sup> two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, <sup>15</sup> thirty milking camels and their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. <sup>16</sup> He placed these in the charge of his servants, in separate herds, and told his servants, 'Go on ahead of me, with a space between each herd.' <sup>17</sup> He also instructed the first servant, 'When Esau my brother meets you, and asks, "Who are you doing this for? Where are you going? And who owns these animals in front of you?" <sup>18</sup> then you will answer, "They belong to your servant Jacob; they are a gift sent to my lord Esau; and he is coming along behind us."' <sup>19</sup> He said the same to the second and the third and to all who came afterwards with herds, "You must say the same to Esau when you meet him, <sup>20</sup> and you must say, "and he is coming along behind us."' For he thought, 'I may placate him with the gift that I am sending on ahead, and then when I see his face; perhaps he will receive me.' <sup>21</sup> So the gift went on ahead of him; but he spent that night himself in the camp.

### Review

These are the actions of a man intent upon facing his past, and bearing the consequences; and these few verses are therefore a graphic demonstration of repentance which goes before reconciliation and forgiveness. Jacob had grievously sinned against Esau over twenty years previously by stealing his birthright by deception (25:29f.) and also his blessing (27:1f.); he now

knew the terrible power of this sin because he had been forced to live on the receiving end of Laban's deception for a long time, and had come to know its evil power. He knew that his own deeds in the past were not right before the God of his Fathers, and this meant that he had to deal with it in a godly way as he prepared to enter the Promised Land. On his journey, he could have tracked west from the hill country of Gilead and crossed the Jordan directly into the middle of Canaan, but he was led by the Lord to face his brother Esau and continued south (32:3). He began his preparation for the meeting by dividing his whole convoy of family and flocks in two (32:7,8) and fervently praying to Almighty God (32:9-12).

Our passage of Scripture today describes the details of Jacob's preparations, but what is spiritually remarkable about all this is that he had no model upon which to base his actions. At this point in the history of God's people there were no rules and regulations in force, such as those in Exodus and Leviticus which speak of the duties of reparation of someone who had stolen from another (e.g. Exodus 22 or Leviticus 5,6). Jacob was now sufficiently in tune with the Lord's will to be led by Him to meet Esau face to face to deal with the problems of the past, and he was prepared to offer as much as Esau wanted from him in order to win back his favour and find the peace that would come from such reconciliation. We have no complete record of the total of Jacob's camels, donkeys, cattle or herds and have no idea how much more he was capable of giving, but there is no doubt about the sincerity of Jacob's intent. What we do not yet know is whether Esau will accept this gift or treat it with disdain. His approach with 'four hundred men' however (32:6), gave Jacob grave concern. He was a substantial enough leader in his own right to muster a significant army, but was he coming in peace or in war?

Jacob was prepared to risk all in pursuit of what was right in his spiritual pilgrimage back to God's Promised Land, and in pursuit of that which Esau could not take from him even if he seized all his possessions, the Covenant blessing of God. This is no small matter, for this passage of Scripture is the one that leads up to the profoundly important text from Genesis where Jacob crosses the Jabbok river alone and struggles with a man who turns out to be an unidentified messenger or angel of God (Gen 32:22-32 – see tomorrow). This great turning point in Jacob's life could not come until he was ready to lay everything before God and risk all his worldly wealth. Jacob's personal ability to submit himself in this way was the very thing that God required of him for the continuance of the Covenant and this enabled him to become arguably the greatest character amongst the forefathers in Genesis.

### Going Deeper

Clearly, we will have to look at the details of what Jacob did in this passage and also the spirit in which he did it. On the surface, the passage does not appear to say much, but there is no shortage of inspiration for us if we follow its spiritual significance.

#### ***The purpose of the gifts***

Jacob was a deeply human character and yet one who had become both profoundly pragmatic and also full of trust in God. He is one of the best Biblical examples of someone who was able to trust God completely, and yet plan for all circumstances; because from an earthly perspective, he did not know what was going to happen next. This is often true of our own circumstances, and Jacob's actions are an example of an important worldly wisdom.

At the heart of this text is the dichotomy facing Jacob over his future. God had promised him that he would have great blessings, and as many descendants as 'the sand on the seashore' (32:12). Jacob had worked for twenty years to lay the foundations of this blessing, establishing his life and his wealth, and also raising a large family with eleven sons and one daughter (29:31-30:24). He did not doubt by now that this was the Lord's work, and God had confirmed this as the fulfilment of the Covenant Promise by keeping him and his whole company safe from Laban as he made his escape from Mesopotamia (Gen.31). Yet God required one more thing from Jacob. He had to face the prospect of losing all because of his past sin. How easy it would be for Jacob if God had declared that the lessons he had learned about deception from Laban were sufficient for his own sin, and simply led Jacob into the Promised Land directly across the Jordan River. But they were not, and Jacob had to seek peace with Esau.

God directed Jacob towards Esau in order to face the consequences of his past and find peace by risking everything, including all the earthly evidence of the Covenant blessings. We learn

from today's text that the Covenant was not a just a matter of wealth, family and possessions, but a matter of the heart again; as it had been in the days when Abraham had to believe God would make 'generations' out of him, even though he and his wife were barren (Gen 15:1-6). If Abraham showed faith in trusting God for this promise, then Jacob also showed faith in submitting what he owned to Esau either as a prize of war or as a gift. Despite all the preparations, Jacob knew full well that if Esau wanted to do so, his four hundred men could easily overcome the whole of his group. Of course Jacob attempted to plan to avoid the worst scenarios, which is why he divided the whole camp and sent ahead of him the five groups of gifts. The fact was that everything could well be lost. What Jacob was doing was taking the risks of faith that the Lord required of him.

#### ***Organising the gifts***

Jacob began to prepare the gifts by taking 550 animals from his overall stock and organising them into five groups each of goats, sheep, camels, cattle and donkeys. In addition, the camels were females with milking calves, which dramatically increased their value, and placed them at the centre of the whole gift. The instructions Jacob gave to the herdsmen in charge of each of the gifts was clear. They were to address Esau as 'lord', and they were to describe Jacob as his 'servant' (32:18). In addition they were to describe each of the five herds of animals as a 'gift'. Such gifts were commonly given by rich and wealthy men of ancient oriental times in advance of an important meeting, and other such gifts in the Scriptures were given when one party accepted inferior or 'vassal' status to another (2K17:3; Hos 10:6). The intention here, though, was to prepare for an uncertain meeting, the result of which was unknown and for Jacob, it was a test of faith in which he could not avoid putting his whole family at risk.

The word 'gift' is itself interesting, as it is closely related in Hebrew to the word for 'favour' and 'choice' and which lies behind the idea of God's free unmerited favour in choosing His people. Indeed, it is the one Hebrew word that comes closest to the New Testament word 'grace' which Paul used to describe the work of Jesus Christ on the Cross. Most Christians find the word so natural to the vocabulary of Christian Faith that they do not realise it is extremely rare in the Old Testament (see it only in Zechariah 7:4; Jeremiah 31:2; Psalm 45:2). This connection, however, helps us remember that God was always a God of 'grace', even in Old Testament times, for His nature has always been constant. His grace was shown by his free choice of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to be His people, and by His care for and guidance of them through considerable difficulties until each was able to fulfil their purpose within God's greater plan.

Because of this word connection concerning 'gift' and 'grace', some commentators think that Jacob was offering the very Covenant blessings of God back to Esau, if he wanted it. I doubt that this is the case, because God was in control of everything, not Esau, and his choice rested on Jacob. The whole event was a final testing of Jacob before the Lord finally gave Jacob the personal blessing by which Jacob became assured of his place in God's Covenant plan (as we shall see in tomorrow's passage).

At the end of our passage today, we learn the truth of Jacob's actions when he explains why he took the action of dividing the gifts; 'that I may placate him with the gift ...' (32:20). Many translations of the Bible have 'that I may appease him ...' but the word I have translated as 'placate' comes from the same Hebrew word as that used for the famous word 'atonement', which means 'to make peace'. The gift was Jacob's 'atonement' gift and was given in a spirit of peace, seeking wholeness of relationships rather than merely attempting to calm Esau down the closer he came. Commentators have often thought that the detailed description of Jacob's instructions to the servants in charge of each group was designed to ensure that Esau would be successively mollified if he was angry with Jacob. This is a reasonable interpretation, but it is not sufficient. Jacob's aim was not to merely to calm Esau down from any anger he maintained in his heart, but to try and indicate sincerity and integrity. In this way, by the time the two of them met, Jacob hoped 'perhaps he will receive me' (32:20). For him, that would be peace enough.

The end result of the whole process of offering gifts was to be a 'face to face' meeting. Jacob had to face his past by meeting Esau directly and accepting the consequences. Many of us would prefer to take a path which avoids going back to deal with issues of the past, but God shows in this story that it is sometimes necessary. Certainly, if Jacob was to be the true